

Not the T'ang Quartet You Remember

Singapore's premier string quartet celebrates 30 years with two new members, and a new journey.

CULTURE

T'ang Quartet is a name even a classical music neophyte is likely to recognise. Perhaps you remember them as the foursome who posed topless with their string instruments during an era when the genre was stodgy. Or the time they played air-violin in town to promote a concert in 2000, or the Christmas special when they played as parodies of stereotypes of their own lot, complete with intentionally wrong notes and ringtone accompaniment. Or perhaps you just know the T'ang Quartet as great instrumentalists. Whatever your impression of them was, all you need to know about them now is that they have grown up.

Three decades have passed since the group — violinists Yu-Ying Ng and Ang Chek Meng, violist Lionel Tan, and his brother and cellist Leslie Tan — made their debut. The quartet has been mostly clothed in recent years and spends more time teaching at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. However, they are still brandishing their bows with ardour and versatility, unwilling to let the appeal of chamber music escape the shortened attention spans of the current generation.

So, it's a good thing the T'ang Quartet has fresh blood.

PHOTOGRAPHY MUN KONG GROOMING KEITH BRYANT LEE USING OUAÏ & MAC COSMETICS



CULTURE

(from left) Wang Zihao, Yu-Ying Ng, Ang Chek Ming and Han Oh

As a result of the Tan brothers' gradual retirement, the quartet now includes Han Oh, viola, and former student Wang Zihao, cello. In April, the refreshed T'ang Quartet performed at their 30th-anniversary concert.

Oh is no stranger to the T'ang Quartet, having filled in for his predecessor between 2009 and 2011 when he was recovering from health issues. "That was more nerve-wracking than joining them this time," he remembers. "I was parachuted into the group just as they were about to leave for Australia and New Zealand. I was crapping my pants. I didn't know what I was in for. But I thoroughly enjoyed it because I was a fanboy."

Having learned from the Tans during his early musical education, it was a dream come true for Oh to play with his idols. "I've always wanted to play in a quartet due to their influence, and not just as a soloist or in an orchestra. Life has a strange way of working out."

Wang, who was just a year old when the T'ang Quartet was formed, was similarly awestruck when Ng and Ang approached him for the position. "These are successful musicians who are my mentors and coaches. They taught me tricks that I showed off when I joined the Singapore Symphony Orchestra," he says. "When I first joined them last June, I could not sleep because I was worried about rehearsals. Now I'm used to it and getting better."

Though it's hard to tell if Wang is naturally quiet and contemplative, or just being modest, the others have nothing but praise for their youngest member. "We went with the younger member for our own selfish reasons," admits Ang.

"Our intention over the years has always been to institutionalise the T'ang Quartet, just as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra is.

The National Arts Council frequently inquires about the succession plan we have for when the time comes to stop playing. This was the right decision because this new dynamic brings a different and more daring energy."

Oh agrees: "Leslie always feels like he just had five Red Bulls. It was exciting to watch, and I get energetic playing with him, but Zihao's sound is so beautiful, like a warm, fuzzy blanket."

The T'ang Quartet had no shortage of talent, but that alone wouldn't have been enough to fill the void left by Leslie and Lionel Tan. Synergy is what made the group memorable (and loved) for years, and it still has it today. "There has to be a basic level of respect for each other. All of us have different opinions and ideas about how music is expressed. However, we should not dismiss

them without first experiencing those ideas together. I always tell my first violin students that it's not about how well they practise their solos but how well they get along with everyone else because they have to be able to support you."

Second violinist Ang agrees that violinists are the divas of the string instruments as they are the ones that scream the loudest, so a good violist and cellist add a great deal of depth and richness to the music.

"It is quite crazy being on the viola," Oh says. "We must play everything from the bass to the soprano lines. I am the glue between the top and the bottom, so I rarely get to play the melody, but that isn't what interests me. I am interested in the colours only I can create."

Wang and his cello anchor everyone. There is no music without bass, he says

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simply. "As cellists, we are the rock. However, I strongly believe that we empower one another to achieve greatness. Even when I'm just playing the simple stuff, I'm always inspired by the melody or," he glances at Oh, "by the butter."

Despite a stellar reputation, the quartet recognises classical music's niche appeal — a fact that the pandemic only made more distressing. Over the past two years, so much entertainment has been put out that people are getting media fatigue and gravitating toward simpler, more digestible entertainment, says Oh.

However, they are not concerned that people will abandon the genre completely. "You need a connoisseur's approach to classical music. You must learn to enjoy it. If not, it's akin to mixing green tea with 21-year-old Scotch."

Thus, the T'ang Quartet won't be relying on cheeky gimmicks or image makeovers in order to attract new audiences. Today, it's all about their dedication to the craft.

Towards the end of July, the foursome will present a two-day, invitation-only fundraising concert for a cause. At the end of the year, they will perform works by local composer Chen Zhangyi and release a coffee-table book, *T'ang At 30*.

"Nobody is bigger than the music, just as no footballer is bigger than the club he plays for," Ang says about the quartet's well-earned distinction. "I don't think any musician would think they were better than Beethoven. All we do is serve the art. Maybe what makes us the T'ang Quartet is that we put in more effort, we put in more hours, and we have more experience. But it's still very important that we are sincere in our approach to music." **A**



The original members, Ng Yu-Ying and Ang Chek Ming



Han Oh on the viola and Wang Zihao on the cello



The 30th-anniversary concert in April